

# LEARNING THE HARD WAY

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## Force Protection 1983–2000

*Lieutenant Commander John Callaway, U.S. Navy*

*Since the attack on Khobar Towers in June 1996, the Department of Defense (DoD) has made significant improvements in protecting its service members, mainly in deterring, disrupting and mitigating terrorist attacks on installations. The attack on USS Cole (DDG 67), in the port of Aden, Yemen, on 12 October 2000, demonstrated a seam in the fabric of efforts to protect our forces, namely in-transit forces.*

USS COLE COMMISSION REPORT, EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**he October 2000 terrorist attack on the guided-missile destroyer USS *Cole* (DDG 67) in the port of Aden, Yemen, is commonly viewed in the larger context of al-Qa'ida's September 11th campaign. Beyond the initial official investigations, the military force-protection context of the attack has largely been overlooked as analysts have traced the movements of al-Qa'ida operatives who were traversing the globe at the time. But the proper context of the *Cole* bombing is a series of terrorist attacks against U.S. military forces abroad that started in 1983.

The 1983 Beirut bombings, the Khobar Towers attack in 1996, and the *Cole* attack in 2000 have striking similarities, though their perpetrators were different. A comparison of these three cases highlights three trends concerning organizational learning in the military about force protection: organizational change

(command and control), intelligence support, and recognition of the threat. This article assesses, on the basis of the investigations conducted after the attacks, what the military has learned about force protection, and how well.<sup>1</sup>

These three cases are illuminating with respect to casualties suffered and lessons learned. They also illustrate the military's organizational change over time with respect to the three underlying themes. By the late

*Lieutenant Commander John Callaway is the commanding officer of USS Scout (MCM 8) and Mine Countermeasures Crew Dominant. Selected as the Navy's 2005 Politico-Military Scholar, he graduated from Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government with a master's degree in 2007. He served previously, among other assignments, as operations officer in the USS Chancellorsville (CG 62) and USS Benfold (DDG 65), and action officer in the Politico-Military Affairs Division (N525) of the Navy Staff.*

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1990s (see figure 1), the military had acknowledged that command-and-control structures were inadequate in the Beirut barracks and Khobar Towers bombings and had begun to address them formally. Second, it had learned that while relevant intelligence was collected, analyzed, and disseminated, warnings went unheeded in both earlier cases. Third, the military's understanding of the terrorist threat was by that time evolving from the relative ignorance of the 1980s to dim

**FIGURE 1**  
**MILITARY LEARNING AFTER THE 1983 AND 1996 ATTACKS**

	Beirut Barracks	Khobar Towers	USS <i>Cole</i>
Command-and-control outcome	Goldwater-Nichols Act	Force-protection staff creation	?
Intelligence failure? <sup>a</sup>	No	No	?
Definition of terrorism	Accident	War	?

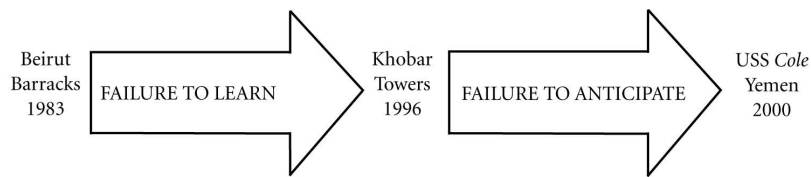
a. "Intelligence failure" is defined as "systematic organizational surprise resulting from incorrect, missing, discarded, or inadequate hypotheses." Robert Johnston, *Analytic Culture in the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, 2005), p. 6.

recognition. More generally, and as depicted in figure 2, the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing represented a "failure to learn" from the 1983 Beirut barracks attack.<sup>2</sup> The 2000 *Cole* bombing, in contrast, was a "failure to anticipate" the next attack despite having learned the lessons of Beirut.

April 2008 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1983 bombing of the American embassy in Beirut, Lebanon. The embassy was destroyed by a car bomb in that attack, and sixty-one people were killed.<sup>3</sup> The embassy's vulnerability in the April attack pointed to the vulnerability of U.S. military forces in Lebanon. Indeed, the 1983 terrorist bombing that most people remember is the attack on the U.S. Marine barracks at the Beirut International Airport in October. A battalion of Marines was ashore on a peacekeeping mission. Two hundred twenty of its Marines plus another twenty-one military personnel were killed by a truck bomb that exploded with the force of twelve thousand pounds of TNT.

The October attack exposed severe problems in command and control, specifically the lack of authority of the regional commander in chief (as today's combatant commanders were then known) over the Marines on the ground. It also revealed micromanagement by Washington of military actions in Lebanon

**FIGURE 2**  
**MILITARY FAILURES IN TERRORISM**



through a bloated chain of command that stretched from the Pentagon to the field.<sup>4</sup> These faults contributed to the impetus for the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986.<sup>5</sup>

The investigations that followed the 1983 attacks also raised questions about the effectiveness of intelligence. At the strategic level, the terrorist threat had already been widely understood, and the bombing of the embassy in April clearly had indicated its seriousness. The next month, five months before the attack on the barracks, a team surveyed intelligence support for the Marine peacekeepers at the tactical level. It reported that much intelligence was available but that there were problems in coordination of reporting and analysis.<sup>6</sup> No action was taken on the report.

Between the survey in May and the October bombing, attacks on the Marine peacekeepers escalated from sniping to heavy rockets and artillery; the Marines received “over 100 intelligence reports warning of terrorist car bomb attacks.”<sup>7</sup> Yet still no action was taken on the survey’s recommendations. After the attack, the Director of Naval Intelligence reviewed the intelligence data available before the bombing and concluded, “The chances were pretty good we would have been able to predict [the attack].”<sup>8</sup> Tactically, intelligence had been available but not had not been prioritized or tailored to support force protection.

The official Department of Defense investigation of the attack, known as the Long Commission, identified a lack of antiterrorist human intelligence (HUMINT) as contributing to the vulnerability of the Marines. Specific threats, though received in high volume, “seldom materialized.”<sup>9</sup> Additional human-intelligence capability was needed to prioritize and determine the credibility of those threats and then exploit any leads developed in the network of sources. This type of fully integrated intelligence plan provides commanders on the ground a clearer picture of what they can actually expect.

The Long Commission also specifically investigated “terrorism as a mode of warfare.”<sup>10</sup> In 1983, terrorism was not considered a form of warfare, and the *Joint Chiefs of Staff Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* did not (per Locher)

define it. In fact, the cause initially listed for those killed in the bombing was “accidental death.”<sup>11</sup> The commission argued, however, that “the systematic, carefully orchestrated terrorism which we see in the Middle East today represents a new dimension of warfare.” Whatever the formal definition, however, a senior European Command officer commented that commanders on the ground in Lebanon “neglect[ed] their responsibility for security of their personnel in high-threat areas, against repeated, proven attack capabilities.”<sup>12</sup>

In November 1995, terrorists bombed the office of a State Department–run program in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, killing five American military personnel. In a remarkable parallel to the Beirut attacks, seven months later the terrorists struck again in the same country, with greater force and against a military target. This time terrorists struck Khobar Towers, a U.S. Air Force barracks in Dhahran. The facility housed American and allied personnel supporting Operation SOUTHERN WATCH, the coalition enforcement of the no-fly zone then established over southern Iraq. This attack, delivered by a truck bomb on 25 June 1996, killed nineteen airmen and wounded approximately five hundred.<sup>13</sup>

The Khobar Towers bombing, thirteen years after the Beirut attack and nearly ten after passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, again shocked the U.S. military. Goldwater-Nichols had given regional combatant commanders authority to match their responsibility to forces in the field. However, their staffs had still lacked an organizational focus on terrorism. Therefore, the Joint Chiefs of Staff created an office, known as J-34, to deal with antiterrorist and force-protection matters, and corresponding offices took shape at the lower echelons of command.<sup>14</sup>

In the Khobar Towers case intelligence information had once again been available, if not specific. The Downing Assessment Task Force was created to investigate the attack. Its Finding 7 states, “Intelligence provided warning of the terrorist threat to U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia.” Senator Arlen Specter, chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, declared after his committee conducted its own investigation, “There was no failure of intelligence, but a failure to use intelligence.”<sup>15</sup> However, the Downing assessment did lament the lack of HUMINT capability: “Human intelligence . . . is probably the only source of information that can provide tactical details of a terrorist attack. The U.S. intelligence community must have the requisite authorities and invest more time, people, and funds into developing HUMINT against the terrorist threat.”<sup>16</sup>

In marked contrast to conventional wisdom at the time of the Beirut bombing and even to the tentative language of the Long Commission, the Downing task force asserted flatly that “terrorism . . . is a form of warfare.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the first opinion expressed in the Downing assessment articulated a new

understanding of the terrorist threat, declaring terrorism to be “AN UNDECLARED WAR ON THE UNITED STATES.”<sup>18</sup> The Downing task force also recommended command-and-control changes and identified intelligence lessons. Some of the lessons repeated the Long Commission’s findings. Some lessons were new. But some lessons were still to come.

### USS *COLE*

On 10 October 2000, *Cole* transited the Suez Canal en route to the Persian Gulf, where the ship was to enforce the United Nations sanctions against Iraq and keep its Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles ready for possible use by the Commander, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). On 11 October 2000 *Cole* passed southward through the Red Sea at twenty-seven knots. The next day, the 12th, the ship entered Aden and tied up alongside a dolphin, a pierlike structure of concrete pilings in the middle of the harbor, to take on fuel. As is customary when a ship visits a port, numerous small vessels soon approached it. Two tugs maneuvered the ship along the dolphin, assisted by two smaller boats carrying line handlers, who would pull the mooring lines to the dolphin’s cleats and make them fast. The harbor pilot, when his task was complete, disembarked into a pilot boat, and the husbanding agent, a representative of the company arranging for fuel and other services, boarded from (probably) yet another boat. Several small scows came to take trash, as well as sewage pumped from the ship’s holding tanks.

Less than two hours after *Cole*’s arrival, another small craft approached the warship from the pier area across the harbor. One man was in the stern, handling the outboard motor, and a second was standing in the bow. The skiff turned toward the center of the warship, the man in the bow waving to the crew topside, and a moment later an explosion rocked the harbor. An explosive charge ripped a forty-by-forty-five-foot hole through the steel skin of the ship, killing seventeen sailors and wounding forty-two others.<sup>19</sup>

The attack was actually a second attempt. Earlier that year, on 3 January, USS *The Sullivans* (DDG 68), another guided-missile destroyer, had entered Aden Harbor to refuel. As it stood in, al-Qa’ida operatives launched a small boat into the water from a trailer. The boat, overloaded with explosives, sank to the bottom almost immediately.<sup>20</sup> The failed attack escaped the notice of the U.S. intelligence community and, apparently, of the Yemeni government.<sup>21</sup> The boat and the explosives were later recovered and reassembled for use against another target of opportunity, which turned out to be *Cole*.<sup>22</sup>

### *Command and Control*

Investigations into the *Cole* bombing revealed three main areas of concern with respect to command and control. Ambiguity in the chain of command at the time of the Beirut bombing had been resolved, but the attack on *Cole* exposed a “seam” that came into play when forces transferred from one combatant commander to another. Second, the staff structure to support antiterrorism and force protection that had been created after Khobar Towers now proved weak and inefficient. Finally, the investigations found fault with the engagement strategy that had brought *Cole* to Yemen in the first place.

U.S. military forces are generally manned, equipped, and trained in the continental United States and then deployed forward to meet the requirements of regional combatant commanders. The Goldwater-Nichols Act strengthened the authority of the combatant commanders in their respective regions, but it did not enforce uniformity of practice and procedure. Therefore, when a ship, as *Cole* did, left the European Command area of responsibility to enter CENTCOM’s, its entire operational chain of command changed at the designated moment of transfer. This is significant because the changes included operating procedures, reporting processes, and administrative requirements, as well as the authorities who monitored them. This change occurred for *Cole* on 9 October, three days before the attack. *Cole* was no different in this respect from dozens of other ships passing into the Persian Gulf, but this “seam,” the magnitude and abruptness of the adjustments required of the ship and the lack of opportunity for the new commander to confirm them, likely made it easier for al-Qa’ida to surprise a newly arrived target of opportunity.

Specifically, the change of operational control to CENTCOM gave *Cole* a new immediate superior—Commander, Task Force 50 (CTF 50), the *Abraham Lincoln* carrier battle group commander. CTF 50 assumed responsibility for, in addition to all other aspects of the ship’s employment and logistics, *Cole*’s protection. The task force commander had designated an assistant to his staff intelligence officer as staff force-protection officer. One investigation of the subsequent attack was to criticize CTF 50’s lack of oversight of *Cole*. Specifically, obvious administrative errors in the *Cole*’s own force-protection plan had not been corrected, and, more important, the plan had not been tailored to address the specific conditions of Aden Harbor—notably, the existence of the fueling dolphin.

Lastly, the reports of the Defense Department’s *Cole* Commission (known as the Crouch-Gehman Report) and the House Armed Service Committee investigation would both question the appropriateness of Yemen as a place for fueling American warships. The choice of Yemen was a primary focus during the Senate

Armed Services Committee hearings as well. The chairman, Senator John Warner, pointedly asked, “The one question all of us keep hearing . . . [is] why Yemen?”<sup>23</sup>

The answer was that in 1997 the Yemenis had approached the State Department and Department of Defense hoping to improve relations with the United States. The Navy generally refueled warships at sea, steaming in groups. However, single-ship transits were becoming more common as the post–Cold War force structure began to draw down and as post–Gulf War requirements led Central Command to call for ships one or two at a time to enforce sanctions, their Tomahawk missiles ready. Until 1997 Djibouti had been the primary refueling stop for ships transiting from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf. However, conditions there were becoming increasingly unsatisfactory. In 1998, given Yemeni interest, the deteriorating situation in Djibouti, and the lack of alternative ports, the Navy concluded a bunkering (fueling) contract with the port facility at Aden.

General Anthony Zinni, U.S. Marine Corps, who was the CENTCOM commander at the time, and his subordinate Vice Admiral Charles W. Moore, commander of the Fifth Fleet, both visited Aden to see the fueling facilities at first hand. A security survey, called a “vulnerability assessment,” was then conducted. Between September 1997 and December 2000, twenty-nine U.S. Navy ships visited Aden Harbor. Twenty-six of the twenty-nine calls were brief stops for fuel.

Yemen was known to be a dangerous place, but the configuration of Aden’s harbor, including the fact that ships would fuel at a dolphin in the middle of the harbor, seemed to mitigate security concerns. Normally, refueling ships moor to a pier and take fuel by hoses from “risers” installed in the pier or from trucks. A ship moored to a pier is more difficult to defend than one moored some distance from shore, because of vehicle and pedestrian access. Also, host nations typically prohibit visiting foreign military personnel from carrying weapons onto a pier. The choice of Yemen, then, was an attempt to balance engagement priorities and operational requirements with force-protection risks. The Crouch-Gehman commission, however, summarized its concern about this balance at the macropolicy level: “The execution of the engagement element of the National Security Strategy lacks an effective, coordinated interagency process, which results in a fragmented engagement program that may not provide optimal support to in-transit units.”<sup>24</sup>

### *Intelligence*

With respect to force-protection intelligence, *Cole* was on its own in many ways. The formal report to Commander, Fifth Fleet required by the Navy’s *Judge Advocate General Manual* (in service parlance, the “JAGMAN investigation” of this incident) described the system as “putting the burden on the unit to ‘pull’



information ‘down’ from various sources.”<sup>25</sup> Other avenues of assistance were missing. For example, the Navy Criminal Investigation Service provides force-protection intelligence in foreign ports frequented by the Navy, but none of its personnel were assigned to Yemen, and none traveled to meet the ship there.<sup>26</sup> In any case, human intelligence of the type that might have uncovered the attempted attack on *The Sullivans* was lacking. The Crouch-Gehman Report declares: “We, like other commissions before us, recommend the reprioritization of resources for collection and analysis, including human intelligence and signal intelligence, against the terrorist.”<sup>27</sup>

From a strategic intelligence perspective, there had been ample warning but no specific indications and no “actionable” intelligence. Some specific intelligence was later alleged to have come out of the 1998 al-Qa’ida bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, but if so, either the Federal Bureau of Investigation did not pass it on to the military or the warnings fell on deaf ears. In any case, other warnings came from national foreign intelligence sources in the summer of 2000. One was against a U.S. warship in Lebanon, but since the Navy had no ships there and did not plan to send any, the threat became part of the “chatter.”<sup>28</sup> There was no specific intelligence that put *Cole* in danger of a small-boat attack as it refueled in Yemen.

The Crouch-Gehman Report returned to the idea of a “seam,” this time regarding intelligence support. Apparently endorsing the JAGMAN investigation’s characterization of *Cole* as having had to “pull” relevant intelligence, the Crouch-Gehman commission held that intelligence support should be “dedicated from a higher echelon,” meaning that someone in the chain of command (i.e., with more resources) above *Cole* should have provided better support to the ship. The report went even farther and addressed specifically the tasking of intelligence assets: “Intelligence production must be refocused and tailored to overwatch transiting units to mitigate the terrorist threat.”<sup>29</sup>

### *Understanding the Threat*

Between 1996, the year of the Khobar Towers bombing, and 2000, large-scale terrorist attacks against American interests abroad continued, including the two 1998 East Africa embassy attacks. At the tactical level, antiterrorism and force protection became a routine part of operational planning for military units. In fact, *Cole* received accolades for the force-protection program it developed while preparing for its departure in August 2000 for its deployment to the Mediterranean and Middle East.<sup>30</sup> These procedures were proven during four successful port visits in the Mediterranean area on the way to Bahrain, in the Persian Gulf.

In the three days before the attack, the ship was focused on getting to its patrol station. *Cole* navigated through the Suez Canal, which typically takes from

twenty-four to thirty-six hours, then made a high-speed transit through the Red Sea to Yemen, where it was to fuel and then head to Bahrain to take up its primary mission. This preoccupation is important in retrospect for three reasons. First, the Navy facilities at Bahrain were recognized in April 2000 as having the best force-protection program in the Department of Defense; it was reasonable for the ship to assume accordingly that Bahrain was where the threat was acute. No special arrangements had been made for Yemen, and no American official, military or otherwise, came to meet the ship, not even the local defense attaché. Second, Yemen was merely a brief stop for fuel, a necessary pause as *Cole* hurried on the way to something more important. As the ship entered Yemen, the crew was “not attuned to, or even aware of, the heightened threat level” (that is, of the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean).<sup>31</sup> Third, transiting forces are considered relatively secure. It is difficult for potential enemies to locate, let alone target, units moving from one theater to another. Discerning all this, the Crouch-Gehman Report focused on transiting forces and recommended that antiterrorism and force protection be treated as one of a ship’s primary missions.<sup>32</sup>

#### PUTTING CHECKS IN THE BOXES

Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, in their book *Military Misfortunes*, argue that “every war brings to the surface areas of warfare that . . . do not come under the purview of preexisting military organization.” They define this tendency as a “problem-organization mismatch.”<sup>33</sup> Terrorism was clearly just such a challenge to the U.S. military in the 1980s and 1990s. Cohen and Gooch argue further that leadership must perceive *and correct* the problem-organization mismatch in order to win.<sup>34</sup> But the military did not perceive the problem-organization mismatch arising from the terrorist threat until after Khobar Towers. The military’s lack of progress in understanding the threat of terrorism from the Beirut barracks in 1983 to Khobar Towers in 1996 was a “failure to learn,” by Cohen and Gooch’s definition.<sup>35</sup> In its summary of observations, the Long Commission stated, “The most important message it can bring to the Secretary of Defense is that the 23 October 1983 attack on the Marine Battalion Landing Team Headquarters in Beirut was tantamount to an act of war using the medium of terrorism.” That lesson, however, was not actually learned until after Khobar Towers, thirteen years later.

The creation of the J-34 network in 1996 at the Joint Staff and subordinate force-protection positions throughout the chain of command was an attempt to align the organization with the problem. Unfortunately, organizational alignment was neither uniform nor sufficient to prevent the *Cole* attack. The “J-34” designation itself denotes that on a joint staff, the antiterrorism/force-protection office works in the current operations (J-3) branch. In the field, however, several

echelons below at the carrier-strike-group level, CTF 50's force-protection officer was designated "N20"—that is, a member of the staff intelligence branch (N2).<sup>36</sup> The intelligence branch naturally focused on threats to the strike group in its operating area (the Persian Gulf, in this case), not on the potential threats to small units steaming to join. The Fifth Fleet JAGMAN investigation deplored CTF 50's lack of oversight of the ship's force-protection planning and execution, particularly its tolerance of administrative errors and its generally hands-off approach.<sup>37</sup> The Crouch-Gehman Report recommended several organizational alignments to correct such deficiencies, including coordination between the State Department and the combatant commanders, as well as dedicated intelligence support from higher echelons for transiting units.<sup>38</sup>

Cohen and Gooch define a second category of failure, "failure to anticipate"—that is, "failure to take reasonable precautions against a known hazard."<sup>39</sup> The military learned to take seriously terrorism against its facilities abroad after Khobar Towers but failed to anticipate that the same threat might be faced by transiting forces. The new J-34 force-protection organization had brought attention to the issue but clearly not proficiency. The mea culpa for this fault came in plain language, and it came from Secretary of Defense William Cohen himself:

All of us who had responsibility for force protection of USS *Cole*—including the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Navy, the Chairman, the CNO, CINCCENT, CINCLANTFLT, COMUSNAVCENT, and CTF-50, as well as the Commanding Officer of USS *Cole*—did *not do enough to anticipate possible new threats*.<sup>40</sup>

#### *Failures at the Unit Level*

Scott Snook, in *Friendly Fire*, an analysis of the accidental shooting-down of two Army helicopters over northern Iraq, hypothesizes about general conditions that increase the likelihood of mishaps. Complex organizations working in stressful conditions over long periods of time are susceptible to something he calls "practical drift"—a slow, steady uncoupling of local practice from written procedure.<sup>41</sup> *Cole*'s force-protection planning team had met before the previous four port visits but did not meet before the brief stop for fuel in Aden. Its members, having received no feedback on previous force-protection plans, modified their CTF 50-approved Aden plan at their own discretion. More research is required to determine if the lack of attention to detail and of interaction with superiors displayed here was due to "practical drift," but it is a plausible theory.

Admiral Harold W. Gehman (Retired), one of the co-chairs of the Defense Department's *Cole* investigation, offered an alternative theory in a speech at the Naval Academy in 2005. In it he described an organizational defense mechanism he called "trivialization"—diminishing the importance of something by endless

layers of administration and nit-picking.<sup>42</sup> “They had reduced the process down to its lowest common denominator. I send off a message. I get an answer back. Therefore, we are protected from terrorists.” *Cole* had put all the “checks in the boxes,” but the force-protection training did not “sink in,” Admiral Gehman argued. “Our investigation found that they essentially had gone through the motions. In other words, they had determined the minimum that needed to be done, and they had trivialized the whole event.”<sup>43</sup>

In the end, the *Judge Advocate General Manual* investigation concluded that “USS *Cole* . . . had sufficient available information to make an accurate assessment of the port Threat Levels and conditions in Aden, Yemen.” That is, the attack was a failure at the tactical level. The Chief of Naval Operations disagreed. He felt the attack could not have been prevented and the chain of command (including himself) “did not equip the skipper for success in the environment he encountered in Aden Harbor that fateful day.”<sup>44</sup> The secretary of defense concurred.

### *The Inevitability of Surprise*

Richard Posner’s book *Preventing Surprise Attacks* is a critical review of the 9/11 Commission report. It compares with September 11th the surprise attack at Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Tet Offensive in 1968, and the Yom Kippur War of 1973.<sup>45</sup> Posner “suggests that [some] surprise attacks cannot reliably be prevented” but that some *can* be prevented, deterred, or mitigated in their effects. Figure 3 summarizes the common features Posner found in the four events he reviewed and compares them with the *Cole* attack.

While little evidence suggests that the *Cole* attack was preventable, this possibility should not be ruled out. As noted in figure 3, no warning signs were observed, but that does not mean they were not present. Human-intelligence resources were not in place to unearth traces of the attempted attack on *The Sullivans*, and apparently no countersurveillance assets were in place to observe any “dry runs” the attackers may have made during succeeding fueling stops by American warships. The guided-missile frigate USS *Hawes* (FFG 53) and the guided-missile destroyers USS *Donald Cook* (DDG 75) and USS *Barry* (DDG 52) all refueled in Aden Harbor between *The Sullivans* and *Cole*.<sup>46</sup> But as the Crouch-Gehman Report holds, counterintelligence programs are “integral to force protection.”<sup>47</sup> Without assets ashore, there was a definite gap in counterintelligence coverage however vigilant the visiting ships were in observation and diligent in reporting.

Lastly, *Cole* failed to make itself a “hard target.” The intent of the force-protection measures directed for *Cole* was to provide greater security, of course, but also to demonstrate “resolve” to potentially hostile elements watching the ship or moving

### FIGURE 3 COMPARISON OF USS *COLE* ATTACK TO SELECTED SURPRISE ATTACKS

#### Strategic factors:

- The attacker was too weak to have a reasonable hope of success conventionally.
  - Al-Qa'ida is a nonstate actor and lacks conventional forces.
- The victim's perception of the enemy's weakness contributed to his vulnerability.
  - A brief stop for fuel at a dolphin in daylight.
- The victim lacked understanding of capabilities and intentions.
  - "A waterborne suicide attack had not been considered likely."<sup>a</sup>
- The victim was in a state of denial regarding the forms of attack hardest to defend against.
  - "We failed to anticipate what appeared to be the improbable or weakest link in the chain."<sup>b</sup>
- Intelligence officers were reluctant to challenge superior's opinion for career reasons.
  - An intelligence official resigned in protest the day after the attack.<sup>c</sup>

#### Tactical factors:

- The victim reasonably thought the principal danger was elsewhere or in the future.
  - *Cole*'s primary mission was in the Persian Gulf.
- The victim was lulled by false alarms or deliberate deceptions.
  - Nonspecific warning information was available in numbing quantity.
- Warnings to local commanders lacked clarity and credibility.
  - There was confusion about the applicable threat level in Yemen.<sup>d</sup>

#### Posner's common feature missing from the *Cole* attack:

- Warning signs were interpreted based on the mirror-imaged assumption.
  - There were no *observed* warning signs.

a. HASC, executive summary, p. ii.

b. HASC, p. 39, General Hugh Shelton testimony.

c. John Diamond, "Red Flags Raised before *Cole* Bombing Warning Lacked Specific Details, Pentagon Says," *Chicago Tribune*, 26 October 2000.

d. JAGMAN investigation, p. 103. For more detail see also pp. 20–23.

in to attack. The primary failure of *Cole*, as noted by the *Judge Advocate General Manual* investigation and endorsed by the Chief of Naval Operations, was the failure to screen approaching boats, whether with the assistance of the host-nation military, services contracted through the husbanding agent, or the ship's own boats. As previously mentioned, the JAGMAN investigation and the Chief of Naval Operations disagreed on the issue of whom to hold accountable for this failure.

It is nearly impossible to discern a single, definitive answer as to what made *Cole* susceptible to a terrorist attack that day. There was organizational failure,

by which the ship was left without the appropriate support of higher headquarters. There were also small but important procedural and tactical errors by the commanding officer and his crew. Without a doubt, Snook’s “practical drift” and Gehman’s “trivialization” also played some role. Finally, the commonalities Posner finds among surprise attacks fit the *Cole* situation like a glove.

### A SHIFT TO THE OFFENSIVE

In order to assess the military’s learning about force protection, this article has examined the findings of the investigations conducted after the terrorist attacks on the Beirut barracks in 1983, Khobar Towers in 1996, and *Cole* in 2000. Figure 4 updates the schematic of figure 1 to reflect the “learning curves” in command and control, intelligence, and threat definition over the seventeen-year period between the first attack studied and that on *Cole*.

Faced in 2000 with another failure in force protection, the military as an organization raised the priority of the terrorist threat. The Crouch-Gehman Report recommended, as noted, that antiterrorism/force-protection efforts be given equal weight with a unit’s primary mission. In other words, force-protection training and equipment need to be on par with those devoted to traditional Navy missions like antisubmarine warfare, air defense, and strike warfare.<sup>48</sup> This prioritization has proved necessary to provide a self-defense capability for Navy units against the terrorist threat as they carry out missions around the globe. The military today is organizationally aligned with the problem, and force protection is prioritized as a primary mission—lesson learned.

Intelligence critiques of the three attacks decry the lack of human intelligence. More precisely, no available HUMINT assets were apparently tasked

**FIGURE 4**  
**MILITARY LEARNING 1983/1996/2000 TERRORIST ATTACKS**

	Beirut Barracks	Khobar Towers	USS <i>Cole</i>
Command-and-control outcome	Goldwater-Nichols Act	Force-protection staff creation	AT/FP <sup>a</sup> as a primary mission
Intelligence failure?	No	No	Yes
Definition of terrorism	Accident	War	War

a. AT/FP = antiterrorism/force protection.

according to the potential threat. The practical effect of this “failure to anticipate” was a gap in collection and analysis. A less obvious lesson, specifically from the *Cole* case, is the need for systematic counterintelligence at the unit level. Currently, unit-level training includes a robust countersurveillance capability, but more work needs to be done to determine how that might be improved. An effective counterintelligence program at the unit level closely knitted to a local human-intelligence capability focusing on the terrorist threat should be a goal of the force-protection program. Whether this lesson was truly learned is difficult to assess and may not be known (and then only in the negative sense) at the unclassified level unless there is another successful attack.

Finally, if the blood of the 277 service members killed in the three attacks studied in this article did not drive home the true nature of the terrorist threat to the armed forces, the attacks of 11 September 2001 surely did. The military’s or organizational understanding of the threat matured, its force-protection efforts redoubled, and its stance became proactive. The shift to the offensive marked by Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM signaled an end to the reactive posture of the pre-September 11th military.

Continued review of terrorist attacks against U.S. military forces may yield further lessons that if learned may improve the current program of deterrence, mitigation, and response. Force protection requires deeper investigation and reflection by commanders to ensure that the hard-won lessons of the last twenty-five years remain fresh during the current wars and beyond.

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#### NOTES

1. The six primary investigations reviewed for this article are: U.S. Defense Dept., *Report of the DOD Commission on Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act, October 23, 1983* (Washington, D.C.: 20 December 1983) [hereafter cited as the Long Commission]; U.S. Defense Dept., *Report to the President and Congress on the Protection of U.S. Forces Abroad* (Washington, D.C.: 15 September 1996) [hereafter Downing assessment], executive summary, available at [www.fas.org](http://www.fas.org); Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/Commander, Fifth Fleet, “Command Investigation into the Actions of USS *Cole* (DDG 67) in Preparing for and Undertaking a Brief Stop for Fuel at Bandar at Tawahi (Aden Harbor) Aden, Yemen on or about 12 October 2000” (redacted), Report to Commander,

U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, 27 November 2000, available at [www.intellnet.org/documents](http://www.intellnet.org/documents) [a Navy Judge Advocate General Manual investigation, hereafter cited as JAGMAN investigation]; U.S. Senate, *Lessons learned from the attack on U.S.S. Cole, on the report of the Crouch-Gehman Commission, and on the Navy’s Judge Advocate General Manual Investigation into the Attack, Including a Review of Appropriate Standards of Accountability for U.S. Military Services*, Hearing before the Committee on Armed Services, 107th Cong., 1st sess., 3 May 2001 [hereafter SASC]; U.S. Defense Dept., *USS Cole Commission Report: Learning from the Attack on the USS Cole . . . Implications for Protecting Transiting U.S. Forces from Terrorist Attack* (Washington,



- D.C.: 2001) [hereafter Crouch-Gehman Report], executive summary, available at [www.fas.org](http://www.fas.org); and U.S. House, *The Investigation into the Attack on the USS Cole: Report of the House Armed Services Committee Staff* (Washington, D.C.: House Armed Services Committee, 2001) [hereafter HASC].
2. Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press, 1990).
  3. Long Commission. The description of the events in this paragraph is drawn from the executive summary.
  4. James R. Locher III, *Victory on the Potomac: The Goldwater-Nichols Act Unifies the Pentagon* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2002), p. 162.
  5. *Ibid.*, pp. 142, 163.
  6. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
  7. Long Commission, executive summary.
  8. Locher, *Victory on the Potomac*, p. 161.
  9. Long Commission, p. 63.
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
  11. Locher, *Victory on the Potomac*, p. 154.
  12. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
  13. Downing assessment, executive summary.
  14. William S. Cohen, memorandum, 9 January 2001, "Subj: Review of USS *Cole* (DDG-67) Attack Reports and Suggestions for Additional Recommended Actions," available at [www.gwu.edu](http://www.gwu.edu).
  15. Arlen Specter, "Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Finds Khobar Towers Bombing 'Not the Result of an Intelligence Failure,'" press release, 12 September 1996, p. 1, available at [www.gwu.edu](http://www.gwu.edu).
  16. Downing assessment.
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. *Ibid.* [emphasis in the original].
  19. JAGMAN investigation, p. 8. Initial reports put the size of the hole as thirty-two by thirty-six feet.
  20. U.S. Justice Dept., *Terrorism 2000/2001* (Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2004), p. 8, available at [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov).
  21. Barbara Bodine, interview with author, 2 May 2007 at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ambassador Bodine, who was the U.S. ambassador to Yemen at the time of the bombing, stated that the attack on *The Sullivans* was staged from outside the harbor and in daylight hours during Ramadan, when Muslims tend to be indoors.
  22. *Ibid.*
  23. Transcript, reprinted in "U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee Holds a Hearing on the Recent Attack in Yemen on the USS *Cole* October 19, 2000," [Globalsecurity.org](http://Globalsecurity.org).
  24. Crouch-Gehman Report, p. 1.
  25. JAGMAN investigation, Opinion 17, p. 104; *Ibid.*, Recommendation 14, p. 109.
  26. HASC, p. 11.
  27. Crouch-Gehman Report, p. 2 [emphasis added].
  28. Richard Miniter, *Losing Bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror* (Washington, D.C.: Regency, 2003), p. 215.
  29. Crouch-Gehman Report, p. 2.
  30. JAGMAN investigation, p. 6.
  31. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
  32. Crouch-Gehman Report, p. 9.
  33. Cohen and Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*, p. 84.
  34. *Ibid.*
  35. Cohen and Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*, pp. 26–29.
  36. JAGMAN investigation, p. 83.
  37. *Ibid.*, pp. 102–103.
  38. Crouch-Gehman Report, pp. 5–7.
  39. Cohen and Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*, p. 121.
  40. William S. Cohen, memorandum, 19 January 2001, "Subj: Assessment of Accountability Arising from the Attack on USS *Cole* (DDG-67) on 12 October 2000," available at [www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate) [emphasis added]. CNO is the Chief of Naval Operations; CINCCENT is Commander in Chief, Central Command; CINCLANTFLT (since renamed) was Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet; and COMUSNAVCENT is Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command.



41. Scott A. Snook, *Friendly Fire: The Accidental Shootdown of U.S. Black Hawks over Northern Iraq* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 219–20.
42. Harold W. Gehman, Jr., *Ethical Challenges for Organizations: Lessons Learned from the USS Cole and Columbia Tragedies* (speech, U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md., 7 December 2005), p. 11, available at [www.usna.edu](http://www.usna.edu).
43. Ibid.
44. This quote is from a message the Chief of Naval Operations sent to the entire Navy. It was entered verbatim into testimony before the above-cited SASC hearing on 3 May 2001 (p. 44).
45. Richard A. Posner, *Preventing Surprise Attacks: Intelligence Reform in the Wake of 9/11* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 97.
46. JAGMAN investigation, p. 36.
47. Crouch-Gehman Report, p. 7.
48. Force protection in this context should not be confused with a force-protection posture or employment that minimizes the exposure of military forces to potential risk. Force protection more broadly embraces tools, tactics, techniques, and procedures to deter, mitigate, and respond to terrorist attacks while pursuing a forward-deployed mission.